

27th After Pentecost

November 16, 2008

Zeph 1:7, 12-18; 1 Th 5:1-11; Mt 25:14-30

Introduction. According to most of the experts, we are now experiencing the most serious economic crisis since the Great Depression.

Huge financial institutions are in danger of collapse.

Some of our largest and most venerable industries are on the verge of bankruptcy.

Our pension plans, IRA's, and other investments have tanked.

Although the analysis is far from complete, there seems to be consensus that much of the problem resulted from taking too much risk without enough collateral assets. Now we all are paying the price. And... if we're honest, I think each of us has to admit that we are at least a little bit afraid for our future.

We ask ourselves:

Can I afford to keep all the things I purchased... perhaps even my home?

Can I preserve the life style to which I've become accustomed?

Can I hang on to my dreams for retirement?

Most political pundits agree that the recent presidential election was swayed largely by people's concern over the economy and their future. And here we are, on Commitment Weekend, talking about what we can afford to give away. Not the best timing in the world!

Yet Jesus' parable into today's gospel story addresses precisely this concern about taking risks versus preserving what we have. And, as usual, Jesus' conclusion is startling and uncomfortable.

1. I've talked in other sermons about God's outrageous generosity when it comes to loving us in spite of ourselves. In Jesus' story, the talents entrusted to the various slaves are shockingly generous.

It's important to note that a "talent" is a measure of weight, and has absolutely nothing to do with what we call talents or abilities. A talent = 75 lbs. Presumably what the master entrusted to the slaves was gold; so in today's market, the value of a talent is about \$900,000. That means the first and second slaves received \$4.5 million and 1.8 million dollars.

What would **you** do with that kind of money... especially when you know the person who gave it to you will be back some day for a reckoning? The fact is... you're getting way beyond the limits of Federal Deposit Insurance. Maybe a safe deposit box doesn't sound so bad after all!

Clearly, the first two slaves must have taken enormous risks to double their master's money. You don't get it done with an insured money market account or a garden variety CD. You have to invest in the market.

Perhaps they were lucky. They bought low and sold high. But what if they had bought high, say a year ago, and now were stuck with nearly worthless paper? What would the master have said then?

My point here is: Jesus parable is not only about our talents and resources, and how we use them; but also about recognizing God's economy, and how life works in the future of God.

2. I think the real difference between the slaves in Jesus' story is about the assumptions they make, more than about the work they are willing to do.

The key to understanding this parable may well be in the words of the third slave when the master returns:

"I was afraid.

"I was afraid... and went and hid your talent in the ground."

I think the first two slaves knew their master, but the third one didn't have a clue. The first two knew he expected results, but that the results themselves were less important than the effort.

Thomas Watson, the legendary head of IBM for many years, is supposed to have said:

"To increase your success rate you have to double your failure rate."

Why do you think Ryan Howard strikes out so often?

Because great success rarely happens without first taking some risk.

In contrast, the third slave represents a different assumption: resources are scarce, and you have to do whatever it takes to preserve them.

This is the way the world teaches us:

Work hard and preserve what you earn.

Waste not, want not.

There are "haves" and there are "have-nots."

If you want a place at the table, get there before somebody else does.

Those of you who were here last weekend heard the parable that precedes this one, the story of the wise and foolish maidens. The foolish maidens, you will recall, were those who failed to bring enough oil for their lamps.

I believe there is only one other parable in which Jesus calls the character in the story a fool; and that is the story of the man who builds huge barns to preserve his abundant harvest. Like the third slave in today's story, he operates out of fear and scarcity.

And, like the third slave, he fails to recognize that the abundant gift he receives is not to hoard, but to use... even if it involves risk.

Jesus invites us to look at life from a different point of view.

The way of God's future is not about fear and scarcity.

It's about faith and abundance.

"I came that you might have life... and have it abundantly."

God's way is the way of the cross...
a way Jesus would demonstrate just a few days after telling this story...
way of giving and sacrifice...
a way of risking everything...
for the future of God.

Conclusion. The theme of our stewardship emphasis this fall is: "Money Matters."
In the letter we pointed out how over half of Jesus' parables deal with money.

This isn't because money in and of itself is good or bad; but rather because how you handle the money you have is a spiritual barometer that points to the quality of your relationship with God. As Jesus puts it: "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

There is a wonderful old rabbinic story that describes how, when one comes before the judgment seat of God, God will not ask, "Why weren't you Abraham?" or "Why weren't you Moses?"

What God will want to know is:
"Were you yourself?"
"Were you the person I created you to be?"

As you leave here and return to the ministry of your daily life:
take a good look at how outrageously generous God has **been** to you.
Trust in God's promise to be with you always.
And then don't be afraid to take risks.

Put your self out there and offer love to someone who needs you.
Don't worry about whether or not they will return your love.

Give a percentage of your time to helping someone else.
Don't worry about whether or not you'll have enough time left for yourself.

Give away a percentage of your money.
Don't worry about whether or not you'll have enough left for yourself.

We have received from God daring gifts of generosity.
When someday we are called to account for them,
the question will not be how well we have preserved what we were given,
but how we attempted to use it...
how we attempted to use it to build the future of God.